

## GUIDE AND SERVICE ANIMALS

### Guide Dogs

Guide dogs were introduced in America in 1927 by Morris Frank who founded The Seeing Eye, the first guide dog school in the country.

Inspired by a story about a Swiss program that was training German shepherd dogs to guide blind WWI veterans, Morris Frank, a blind 19-year-old, went to Switzerland to undertake the training and thereby gain independence. Upon his return to America with his dog, Buddy, he demonstrated, in numerous press and goodwill tours, his ability to navigate about town with no help from anyone but his dog guide. The Seeing Eye was incorporated in 1929 and has placed a total of 14,742 dogs by the end of fiscal year 2008 (The Seeing Eye, 2009). Today there are many schools and organizations (both for- and non-profit) that train guide dogs, only one of which is located in Texas – Guide Dogs of Texas – which is in San Antonio.

In a survey conducted in 2008, 6.8 million individuals reported having a visual impairment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). In Texas, 632,267 individuals reported vision loss in the same year (American Foundation for the Blind, 2010). The actual number of visually impaired individuals currently using guide dogs is unknown but estimates range from 7,000 (Guide Horse Foundation, n.d.) to 12,000 (Morris Animal Foundation, 2008) at any one time.

A survey conducted by the Morris Animal Foundation (2008), with 1,003 respondents, reported demographics of guide dog users:

- 67% women
- 52% over 50
- 30% guide dog users for more than 20 years
- 45% had used four or more dogs

Benefits of using guide dogs, as indicated by users responding to another recent survey include:

- move with more confidence
- companionship
- getting around faster
- getting around with fewer accidents
- getting around more accurately

The same survey listed drawbacks to having a guide dog including:

- financial cost of owning a dog
- time and energy required for care
- public reactions to the dog
- possible loss of cane skills

(Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind [GDF], n.d.b)

Many guide dog training facilities breed their own animals. The most popular dog breeds include:

- German Shepherd
- Labrador Retriever
- Golden Retriever
- Lab/golden Mixes
- Standard Poodle

Guide dog training has three basic stages:

1. *Puppy raising.* Dogs are given to volunteers to raise and socialize until they are 14 to 16 months old. During this time the puppy is socialized and taught basic obedience (Guide Dogs of America [GDA], n.d.)
2. *Formal training.* At 16-18 months of age the pup is returned to the school and undergoes four to six months of training with a certified Guide Dog Instructor. The dog is trained to “lead its owner in a straight line, avoiding ground obstacles, overhead

obstacles and obstacles on either side. The dog is trained to stop at curbs, at stairs, and locate things in their environment such as trashcans, seats, doors, elevators, and buttons” (Guide Dogs of Texas [GDTx], n.d.).

3. *Working Team training.* The matched dog/person team spends about four weeks (usually on-site at the training facility) learning to work together in various environments to “master all of the techniques they need to be successful—from finding the checkout counter at a store, to maneuvering through a crowded train station, to passing through a revolving door. The team can travel confidently and independently on suburban routes or city streets, during the day or at night, alone or in rush hour” (GDF, n.d.c).

Although not considered a training stage per se, most training facilities provide follow-up support to graduate teams. Guide dogs require continuing reinforcement training throughout their working life which averages eight years (with a range of between 6 and 10).

The cost for training a guide dog from birth to going home with a partner averages about \$50,000 (GDF, n.d.a). Some training facilities charge nominal fees to users: The Seeing Eye requires \$150 for the first dog and \$50 for each successive dog; Guide Dogs of Texas asks \$1 for each dog. Others, like the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind, provide all dogs free of charge.

### **Service Dogs**

Service dogs are specially trained to assist individuals with physical disabilities. Among the many skills that can be trained are “opening doors and refrigerators, fetching out of reach wheelchairs, retrieving dropped items, turning lights on and off, getting help and moving paralyzed limbs” (Texas Hearing and Service Dogs [THSD], n.d.). Most service dogs are Golden Retrievers or Labrador Retrievers as those breeds have a high retrieve instinct and a good disposition. Many organizations adopt retriever mixes from local animal shelters to use in their training programs (Assistance Dogs International [ADI], n.d.a; THSD, n.d.).

While there are no legal standards for training service dogs, Assistance Dogs International (ADI) (n.d.a) recommends certain minimum standards for all its member organizations including (the service dog must):

- Respond to commands 90% of the time on the first ask at home and in public
- Be trained to perform at least three specific tasks to mitigate the owner’s disability

Additionally, ADI (n.d.b) specifies that the client must demonstrate:

- Knowledge of acceptable training techniques
- Knowledge of canine care and health
- Ability to maintain and/or continue training with their service dog

### **Hearing Dogs**

Hearing dogs are trained to alert their deaf owners to certain sounds. When it hears a knock at the door, telephone ring, smoke alarm, or even a baby’s cry, the dog will lead the partner by touch to the sound. They are trained to respond to both voice and sign language commands (TSHD, n.d.). The ADI specifies that a hearing dog must be trained to alert to a minimum of three sounds. Hearing dogs are generally small to medium size mixed breed dogs adopted from local shelters (ADI, n.d.a). Texas Hearing and Service Dogs located in Austin, Texas is the only organization in the state that trains hearing dogs.

### **Autism Dogs**

A fairly recent addition to the service dog genre, autism service dogs “increase safety levels and alleviate the bolting behaviors common in children with autism by acting as an anchor when tethered to the child” (National Service Dogs, 2008). Additionally, these dogs provide the autistic child and his/her family with opportunities for improved communication and social skills. Autism Service Dogs of America (n.d.) cites improvements in abstract and concrete thinking, focus, and attention span among the advantages of pairing a dog with an autistic child. Training of autism service dogs most often occurs in the child’s home and includes the child, parents, other family

members, educators and health care professionals (All Purpose Canines, n.d.).

### Medical Alert Dogs

There are three primary types of medical alert dogs currently being trained:

- *Diabetes* alert dogs are trained to physically alert their partners to an impending hypo/hyperglycemic event. The dogs can smell subtle changes in the body related to blood sugar levels. While not replacing personal blood sugar testing, the dogs can serve as an additional monitor and alert the partner (or in the case of a child, another family member) to take action (Dogs4Diabetics, 2009; Heaven Scent Paws, n.d.).
- *Seizure* alert dogs are dogs that can somehow sense when an epileptic partner is going to have a seizure. This ability is not present in all dogs nor is it something a dog can be trained to do. Once discovered, this natural ability is reinforced through training and the dog is taught to alert in a variety of manners according to each dog's inclination. Once alerted, the partner can stop whatever s/he is doing and take appropriate action (Canine Partners for Life, n.d.).
- *Psychiatric* service dogs can "alert to panic attacks, mania or dissociation, remind their handler to take medication, provide tactile stimulation during a panic attack, interrupt repetitive behaviors, interrupt dissociation or flashbacks, assist with hallucination discernment, mitigate paranoia" (Psychiatric Service Dog Society, 2008).

### Other Assistance Animals

Dogs are not the only animals recognized for their ability to assist people in their daily lives. In recent years two other species have proven their worth in helping individuals with disabilities live fuller, more independent lives:

- **Guide Horses** provide a viable option for blind people who choose not to have a dog for reasons such as allergies or dog phobia. Miniature horses have been trained as guide animals since 1999. Horses have several advantages over dogs for performing in this capacity, including:

- 350 degree field of vision allows detection of obstacles even before sighted trainers
- Excellent night vision – can see clearly in almost total darkness
- Long lifespan – can live up to 50 years where dog's working life is 8-10
- Calm nature – horses traditionally trained to remain calm in chaotic situations
- Great Memory – does not require constant reinforcement training
- Naturally safety conscious
- Not easily distracted -- not addicted to human attention and normally do not get excited when petted or groomed (Guide Horse Foundation, n.d.)

- **Capuchin Monkeys** have been trained as assistance animals for quadriplegic individuals since 1989 in the Helping Hands program. The monkeys are trained to serve as live-in companions who "use their hands to perform functional tasks that no other assistance animals can accomplish" (Helping Hands, 2008). Natural tool users, Capuchins can be trained to perform a large variety of tasks including "everyday activities such as opening and setting up a drink of water, picking up a dropped or out-of-reach object, or turning the pages of a book...a monkey can help a mobility-impaired person scratch an itch, reposition a hand or a foot after a muscle spasm, assist with use of a telephone and computer, or handle a DVD" (Helping Hands, 2008). Most basic tasks are learned within 18-24 months and additional individual, at-home training is provided after a monkey is matched with a person. The cost of training a monkey helper is approximately \$38,000 from birth to placement but the monkeys are provided free of charge by Helping Hands (Helping Hands, 2008).

### Assistance Animals in Public

A service animal is "any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability" (Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], 2008).

Service (assistance) animals are usually identified by special insignia. A guide dog wears a special harness while working. Service dogs generally wear vests that identify them as working dogs. Hearing dogs may wear an orange vest or collar and leash. It is important to note that it is not required by law that working dogs wear special identification. No legal requirement exists stating that service animals must have identification, be formally trained, or be documented. In Texas, the only requirement is that the dog is “properly harnessed or leashed” (ADI, 2005).

Service animals are allowed anywhere with public access and no extra fee can be levied due to the animals’ presence. Additionally, any animal acquired for the purpose of training is protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), even before the training is completed or ever begins. Businesses that serve the public may:

- Ask if an animal is a service animal
- Remove a service animal only if:
  - The animal is out of control and the owner cannot (or does not) respond appropriately
  - The animal is a threat to the health or safety of others
- MAY NOT ask what a person’s disability is (ADA, 2008).

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